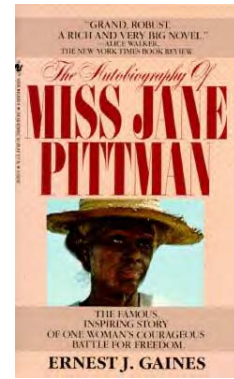


Amy Hissom

English II

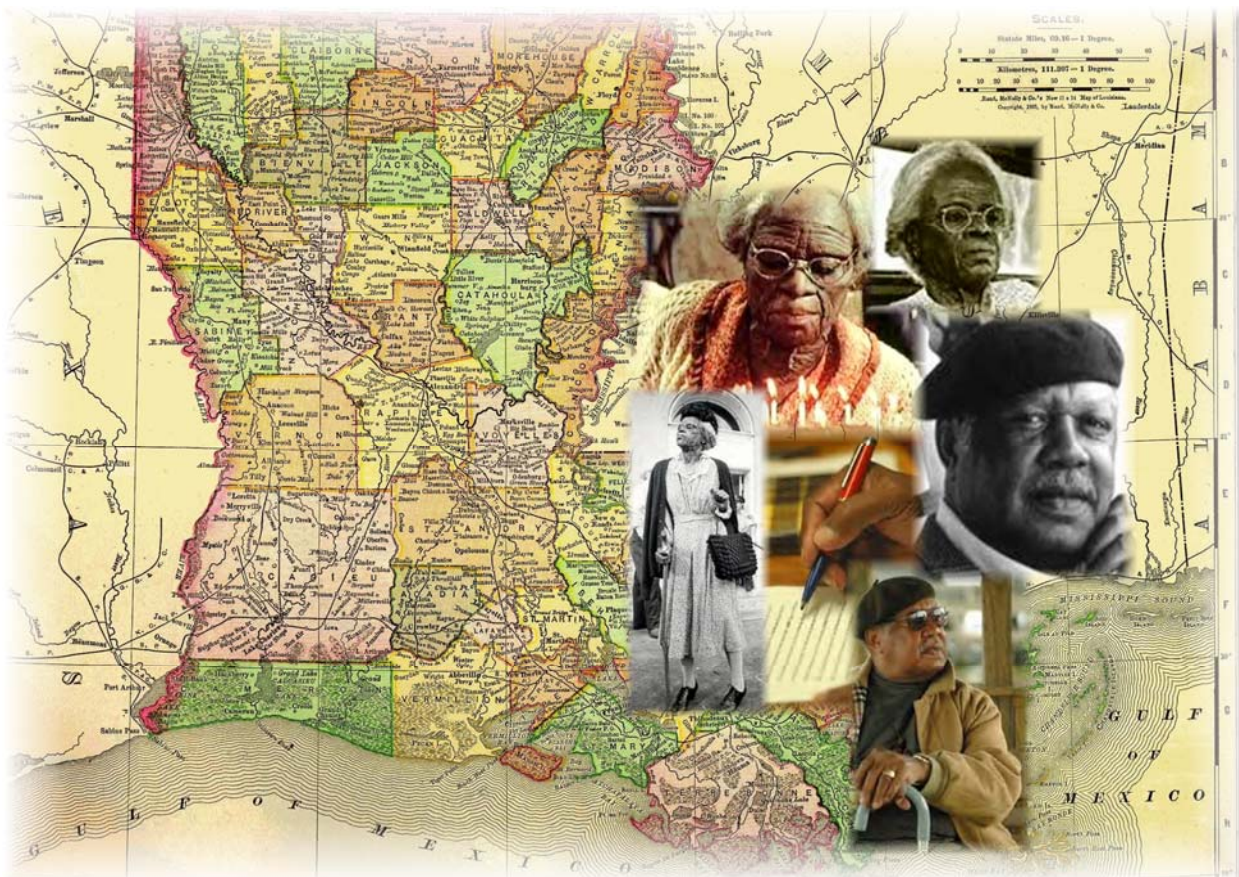
Essay #1

September 16, 2005



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

By: Ernest J. Gaines



I think that the style and theme chosen by Ernest Gaines for his novel “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” was genius. The story being told by a fictional 110 year old black woman who lived through slavery, the civil war and the fight for civil rights during the sixties, in my eyes, was the perfect way to teach the world what inhumanities the African American race had to go through in our country to get to where they are today. In a lot of ways they are still struggling. The actual story of what life was like in the eyes of somebody who lived it was better to me than any factual history book. In writing this novel, Mr. Gaines did a great job with the use of regional dialect and historical events, which caused me to feel like I was right there seeing all the events with my own eyes. My regret is not being there for real. I wanted to jump right into the pages of this book and grab those prejudice white people and shake some sense in them and scream at the top of my lungs; *“WAKE UP PEOPLE! RIGHT IS RIGHT AND WRONG IS WRONG! “ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL IN THE EYES OF GOD!”* Miss Pittman may have been a fictional character made up by Gaines to tell a story, but it saddens me to know for sure that there were many real Miss Jane Pittman’s who lived through the same kind of ordeals that Mr. Gaines’ character lived through. God bless them all! I pray that they have finally found peace. Throughout my essay, I will refer to Jane as Miss Pittman. I believe that she deserves that respect, if not only for the fact that she would have been my elder, but also for all the trials and tribulations she had to live through.

In telling the events of her life, Miss Pittman also talks about the lives of the friends and people who were a part of her life. I think Mr. Gaines choose to add their stories because what happened to them affected her. They looked up to her and came to her for advice. In there eyes, she was older and wiser. The editor writes the introduction of this novel, or should I say Miss Pittman’s interviewer. In his introduction he talks about how Miss Pittman’s story went in all

kinds of different directions. I believe he meant that she would talk about herself one time and without finishing the story, she would go on to talk the next time about somebody else. I'm sure it was because their story tied into her life. In the editor's closing statements of the introduction he says, "*This is what both Mary and Miss Jane meant when they said you could not tie all the ends together in one neat direction. Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane's.*"

The first chapter of this book was special to me. Corporal Brown was a very positive figure to the very young Miss Pittman. I believe that this good-hearted man and his words to her was what gave her determination. He was a white man who looked at her as his equal. He gave her the hope of a new tomorrow. I'm sure there were others like him in real life that positively encouraged Blacks. This was Mr. Gaines way of letting the world know that not every white man was bad. Corporal Brown didn't like her being called Ticey. He said to her, "*Ticey is a slave name, and I don't like slavery. I'm going to call you, Jane.*" That's how she got her name. She was so proud! He was one person who cared about her and that is why, once freed, she set out to find him. I believe that she felt that once she found him she would be safe and have the peace she was really looking for. I think it is very sad that slaves were given the names of their owners or had to pick out a name on their own. Because of this, neither they nor their descendants will ever really know whom they came from or what their real names might have been, especially when a lot of them were born into slavery. This issue is close to my heart, because my aunt and I are trying to trace the fraternal roots of my boyfriend who is bi-racial. His mother is white and his father was black. In doing so, we have also found that in the later years, a lot of the African American people avoided the census. Mr. Gaines' novel tells the story of how Ned, Miss Pittman's adopted son, was first given the last name Brown, because of Miss Pittman's last name

being Brown before she committed herself to Joe Pittman. Later on in life, when Ned moved away to go to school to become a teacher, he became so influenced by a man named Frederick Douglass that he changed his name to Ned Douglass. My boyfriend's name is John Kenneth Douglas II. Frederick Douglass is a figure that he also has looked up to. John's mother has a picture plaque of Frederick Douglass hanging on the wall in her house that has been there ever since John was a child. Just recently, I attended a book fair that was hosted by the Tri-State Genealogical and Historical Society. There were many history speakers there. One of the speakers said that it is a proven fact that names will change in spelling over the generations. Frederick Douglass' last name is spelled with two s's, while John's last name is spelled with one. I find this very interesting. Hopefully someday we will find enough sources to trace John's family. I think it just might be possible that Frederick Douglass could have been one of his relatives. I think it was important that Mr. Gaines put in his book how a lot of the Blacks in our country got the names they have today. It teaches the importance of knowing who you are and where you came from and how this race was denied that.

Throughout this novel Miss Pitman talks about the hardships of slavery, good times and bad times, love and hate, and life and death. I believe that Mr. Gaines also added Miss Pittman's stories of the men in her life and how they die, because it added to her torture. I do think she blamed herself. If she would have stopped Ned, he might have lived. If she would have listened to the hoodoo and waited to do what she was instructed, Joe may have lived. In the end, she finally saw what Jimmy was trying to do and agreed to join him. If she didn't agree to join him, would he have not gone ahead with his plans and still be alive. As for Albert, my opinion is that he got what he deserved, but I'm sure the book was trying to tell you that she believed his death

was her fault also. I feel that none of their deaths were her fault. Mr. Gaines just wanted us to see how she could have blamed herself, which in turn would cause her more heartache.

My favorite part of the book was when she found religion. The words used by Miss Pittman to explain her travels were perfect. She says, "*I feel light. Look like I can fly.*" She goes on to say, "*I had a load of bricks on my shoulders and I wanted to drop it but I couldn't.*" She had to carry that load of bricks across the river to meet her savior. The devil came in various forms to try and stop her from continuing on, but she didn't give up. She saw through those obstacles and succeeded. That takes the determination of someone finally wanting peace in his or her heart. I think we all travel through life looking for that same ultimate trip that will take away the ton of bricks stacked upon our backs from years of wrong deeds, whether they were our own wrong deeds or wrong deeds directed towards us. I can only imagine how relieved a person like Miss Pittman might have felt in finding that peace.

I think Mr. Gaines wanted us to see the wonderful person she was in sticking with Ned and taking care of him along with all the good she did with her wisdom for all of her friends and neighbors. I think he made her character 110 years old before dying, because her ultimate purpose in life was to help her people by telling the story. She had to live through all that she did to be able to tell the whole story. She passed on not too long after her story was completed because her purpose was completed and there was no more she could do.